

Teaching outside the classroom: the contributions and challenges of Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) teaching on fieldtrips

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Abstract

Fieldtrips are an essential, and much loved, part of many university courses. For Geographers in particular, they form a core part of the curriculum. This paper focuses on the GTA experience of fieldtrips, synthesizing the benefits for students, faculty, and GTAs, whilst also highlighting some of the challenges involved. We argue that, on the one hand, fieldtrips are sites where GTAs can learn how to teach, develop as researchers and can be leveraged as opportunities to get to know more senior members of staff and receive mentoring. Further, GTAs also have valuable and unique contributions to make to fieldtrips, such as acting as a 'middle person' breaking down the student-teacher boundary and enhancing teaching by drawing on their own relatively recent experience of being taught as well as their current status as active researchers-in-training. Throughout, we reflect on how GTAs' involvement in fieldtrips extends their ambiguous position within the academy (Muzaka, 2009), which might require some additional boundary-defining work on fieldtrips to use this potential without giving in to its pitfalls. For the potential benefits of GTA

teaching on fieldtrips to be best realised, we end the article with a number of concrete suggestions for academic departments, staff leading fieldtrips and GTAs themselves on how to prepare and implement fieldtrips so as to make the most out of GTAs working on fieldtrips.

Keywords: Fieldtrips, Geography, 'middle person', boundary-defining work, recommendations

Introduction

Fieldtrips are an essential, and much loved, part of many university courses. For Geographers in particular (see Krakowka, 2012; Kent et al., 1997; Pawson and Tether, 2002), they form a core part of the curriculum and are sites through which students experience 'place-based learning' (Sherfinski et al., 2016); learn new research methods (Brill, 2017); and get a generally much-valued understanding of 'how theory works in practice' (Short and Lloyd, 2017).

In this article, we draw on our own experiences as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) on five undergraduate geography fieldtrips undertaken between 2016 and 2019. We argue that, on the one hand, fieldtrips are sites where GTAs can learn how to teach, develop as researchers and get to know more senior members of staff and receive mentoring. Further, we argue, GTAs also have valuable and unique contributions to make to fieldtrips, such as acting as a more approachable 'middle person' breaking down the student-teacher boundary and enhancing teaching by drawing on their own relatively recent experience of being taught as well as their current status as active researchers-in-training. For these potential benefits to be best realised, we end the article with a number of suggestions on how to prepare and implement fieldtrips. Specifically, we reflect on how GTAs' involvement in fieldtrips extends their ambiguous position within the academy (Muzaka, 2009), which might require some additional boundary-defining work on fieldtrips to use this potential without giving in to its pitfalls.

We specifically reflect on our combined experience of teaching on five fieldtrips across three European locations, all of which were around one week. The first two trips, both to the same European capital, were whole cohort trips for second year undergraduates (100+ students) which focused on developing their understanding of how key themes in human geography manifest in practice. Based at different field sites within the city, the trip featured a particular research activity at each site and various lectures at local universities. Students were placed in small groups and were asked to complete a research booklet over the trip as part of the summative assessment. Staff included senior members of faculty, lecturers, teaching fellows, recent PhD graduates who had worked in the city, staff from local universities, and two GTAs. Each member of staff was assigned a small group of six to eight students to work more closely with throughout the trip. The third trip was an optional political geography module to a Southern European city with approximately 20 third-year undergraduate students. It was accompanied by a senior member of faculty and a GTA, with guest lectures and site visits lead by local academics and other local stakeholders. The course included a significant research element with students engaged in carrying out a survey with the local population. Students further completed a fieldtrip diary and wrote a reflective essay, which together formed the summative assessment. Finally, there were two fieldtrips to a major UK city that formed part of a second-year optional Social and Cultural Geography module. The fieldtrips had approximately 20 to 30 students and were accompanied by two senior members of faculty and two GTAs. Course content was further delivered by local academics and professionals.

The course assessment included a research field diary report and an independent research essay based on historical or qualitative field research carried out during the trip. The fieldtrip was followed by several seminars led by senior staff and GTAs, in which students presented their on-going research.

In the remainder of this essay, we first outline the unique contributions GTAs can make to fieldtrips, then summarise what we believe GTAs can learn from fieldtrips. Following this, we outline some of the challenges and tensions that GTAs might face when teaching on fieldtrips, before concluding with a number of concrete recommendations aimed at GTAs teaching on fieldtrips and more senior faculty working with them to help make the most out of GTAs working on fieldtrips.

The unique contributions GTAs can make to fieldtrips

GTAs have unique contributions to make to fieldtrips and can support students' learning in direct and indirect ways. As is established in the emerging research on GTAs' role in the learning process, the GTA can be an effective 'middle person' between students and staff, occupying simultaneously the position of (research) student and teacher (Park, 2011). In the context of fieldtrips, this role is extended and deepened given the extended and often necessarily more informal social interaction between teaching staff and students. For example, we found students felt comfortable asking us what they thought might be 'silly' questions or they initiated

conversations about our own educational trajectory, finding GTAs more relatable and approachable because of their more junior status, their common 'student' status and, sometimes, their greater proximity in age. In this way, GTAs broke down the student-teacher boundary by creating a 'dialogue lens' (Pilsworth, 2017) for research-informed teaching within a fieldwork context.

Moreover, our own relatively recent experience of being taught allowed us to complement more senior faculty's teaching in ways closely informed by recent memories of what we enjoyed and found helpful as students. At the same time, our current status as active researchers and researchers-in-training allowed us to offer first-hand practical advice on issues which students who were just setting out as researchers experienced. In one case, the GTA's own experience of having recently lived in the city as an undergrad also allowed them to direct students to additional relevant resources, places and events that more senior faculty were not aware of. In this regard, fieldtrips can also function as an opportunity for international GTAs to overcome institutional barriers to accessing teaching work (Winter et al., 2014).

The GTAs role as a 'middle person' also worked the other way around, as GTAs were able to solicit, on behalf of the course conveners, students' opinions on how to improve and develop fieldtrips in the future. Our relative approachability and the greater ease with which we found students were able to relate to us, meant we were able to approach them informally and engage more deeply and openly with their reflections on what had worked and what was less

successful. This could then be fed back to conveners, in an anonymous form where relevant, and help them and their colleagues to reflect on their own teaching and develop trips for future years. This is important also because fieldtrips are expensive parts of the curricula, and are tiring to conduct, but are widely appreciated by students. For many departments, returning to the same place consecutively offers a means by which to minimise the burden on teaching and administrative staff while also deepening staff's knowledge of the place. Soliciting evaluative comments from students is thus vital in developing and refining the role(s) of fieldtrips in relation to both the specific goals of the trip (often fostering a research context and developing research skills), as well as situating the gained knowledge within the wider curriculum (Coughlin, 2010; Lonergan and Andreson, 1988). In this context, GTAs can play an important role in ensuring feedback about the trips is captured effectively and fed back to those in charge, thus contributing to the feedback loop of curriculum development at universities.

GTAs' approachability in terms of their institutional status can extend to have an even more substantial impact on those students considering further studies, for example doing a master's degree or even PhD. The GTA can act as a role model of what being a research student is like and relate what doing research degree can be like. We felt this was especially true in moments where we were able to bring in our own research. For example, when giving a lecture that drew on our own research we were able to highlight our own research trajectory and experience and speak to findings from our recent fieldwork (which was undertaken in other

places but touched on related theories and dynamics). Contributing to the deepening of the integration of research and teaching in this way, GTAs can provide a more grounded-in-research learning opportunity for those students eager to learn beyond textbooks. Thinking about the GTA as approachable, not simply in terms of their age or institutional status, but as a 'fellow researcher-in-training' warrants further attention in future research on how the approachability associated with more junior teaching and research staff can aid the teaching experience and help us understand and conceptualise GTAs' unique role in the academy.

On a final note, including GTAs as teaching staff might also prove to be an effective way of enhancing diversity within the academy and, specifically, among staff. Geography is still a very white and middle-class discipline, particularly at more senior staff levels – yet less and less so with regards to the student body (Dorling, 2019). As Lusher et al (2018:203) found, college students' grades improved when they were taught by teaching assistants of a similar 'race'/ethnicity and having teaching staff that students could relate to in terms of demographics such as 'race', class, gender or sexuality also positively influenced students' decisions on majoring and future course enrolment. In this context, including GTAs – who are more likely to be diverse along dimensions such as racialisation, gender, sexuality, or class background, given the only more recent efforts to improve diversity in higher education – on fieldtrips offers a chance for students to benefit from having a more diverse teaching staff (Lusher et al., 2018). This might be of particular relevance for students

from communities which are under-represented in academia and who might thereby gain access to positive role models or, at least, recognise themselves as having a potential place and role in academia. Moreover, whilst research elsewhere has shown that geography fieldtrips provide an opportunity to create a greater sense of community within a cohort (Fuller, 2006; Fuller et al., 2006; Herrick 2010; Phillips 2015), we here argue that the sense of community and belonging created via fieldtrips can be extended, via GTAs, to also include even teaching staff. This offers unique and arguably less-recognised opportunities to leverage fieldtrips as opportunities to enhance the students' – and teachers' – learning experience.

What GTAs can learn from fieldtrips

Fieldtrips offer important sites of learning, for students but also for GTAs. For students, fieldtrips help enhance learning practices by developing research skills and deepening their understanding of the empirical realities underpinning their classroom learning (Krakowka, 2012). In being 'outside the constraints of the "four walls classroom setting", supervised learning can take place via first-hand experience' (Lonergan and Andreson, 1988:64). From a GTA perspective, fieldtrips offer the opportunity to develop as both a researcher and teacher. From a researcher perspective, fieldtrips – especially where they involve a significant research element – offer GTA and other teaching staff a chance to reflect on their own research practice and on how their research sits within a wider body of disciplinary knowledge. For GTAs, in particular, fieldtrips in this way offer great potential to reflect on their on-going PhD research and broader training as researchers,

as well as providing them with a chance to acquire new knowledge that might not always be as closely related to their area of expertise as the literature they usually engage with.

For students as well as GTAs, fieldtrips can also be sites of learning about academia, in terms of its implicit norms, the history of the discipline as well as current developments. On the trips we attended, the course material ranged across the Human Geography syllabus. As such, we were exposed to a range of sub-disciplines within geography that we were not necessarily overly familiar with from our own research and previous studies. As GTAs based in geography but with different levels of exposure to geography pre-PhD (one of us had moved from sociology into geography), we were able to better contextualise our own research and develop a broader understanding of the landscape of the discipline (Chadha, 2011). This is essential for the development of GTAs' skills base also with regards to research-based learning (Brill, 2017), as entry level lectureships require applicants to be able to lecture well beyond their individual sub-field. More generally, it is a reminder of the breadth of the subject and the importance of knowing how your work and the way it is taught fits within the context of the discipline.

At the same time, fieldtrips are also key sites through which GTAs can learn about teaching. They function as spaces where GTAs can interact, informally whilst on the job, with more senior members of staff. These spaces of informality need to be actively curated by departments at other moments, whilst being incidental, such as at dinners or over group breakfasts, on fieldtrips. Trips therefore provide an

excellent way to learn through informal interactions, 'shadow' lectures and teaching approaches of more senior teachers, and potentially develop mentors. Fieldtrips also provide an obvious opportunity to solicit feedback from both senior staff and students on GTAs' teaching approaches – something that might be harder to get during busy term time. On our trips, we had the opportunity to deliver lectures to groups of students, as well as lead smaller groups on tours whilst accompanied by more senior members of staff. We supervised groups of students in their fieldtrip-based research, helped design research exercises that students would carry out and briefed students in the relevant research methods. In these moments we had the chance to reflect on and ask informally for advice about how to engage students, what had worked before (e.g. on previous trips) and how the more established teaching faculty prepared for lectures and other teaching events.

This extended beyond the fieldtrip, which whilst an important launch point for connecting with other members of staff, provides a relatively unique form of teaching. Going beyond the fieldtrips themselves, trips allowed us to also reflect on teaching back in the classroom and the relationships established during the trips provided us with the connections to seek further pedagogical advice and guidance. We had the opportunity to meet and get to know members of the teaching staff, who we might not usually engage with, after guest lectures, in coffee shops, and at dinners. Fieldtrips thus provide a platform through which GTAs can extend their network as they provide the chance to meet potential mentors located across the discipline, outside

the narrow range of their own research, and potentially find out about further teaching opportunities. In general, then, fieldtrips are uniquely important because in their informality they differ from other moments in the wider teaching practice. As Oliver et al. (2018) note, on-site, practical fieldwork constitutes a memorable experience through which students learn. Advancing this, we argue that they also provide memorable experience moments for those who teach and are learning to teach.

Challenges and tensions that GTAs might face when teaching on fieldtrips

The work of GTAs on fieldtrips is not without potential challenges. The approachability, while offering numerous opportunities and benefits, as identified above, also provides potential for moments of confusion and tension for GTAs, senior staff, and students. As such, fieldtrips are a lot of work and can cause stress for GTAs in addition to the more established forms of stresses that GTAs routinely experience, such as concerns about self and their role and ability. Such additional stress can result from preparing for teaching, from having to teach while being observed by senior staff, from being constantly on-call with students and in some cases, from adopting an informal pastoral role, as well as the emotional labour of navigating the position of GTA.

Firstly, GTAs can struggle to navigate the dual identity of student and staff (Park, 2011) inasmuch as the between-ness status of GTAs and the associated blurring of hierarchies can undermine GTAs authority or simply negatively affect their confidence to act with authority. This can be especially true

when GTAs' PhD supervisors are on the trip, as is often the case, because this requires the GTA to navigate multiple and particular roles. While, at best, the supervisor is a supportive mentor and teacher to the GTA, the supervisor also has a certain authority and power over the GTA unlike that of any other faculty member. On the fieldtrip, the GTA now has to mediate this role as their supervisor's student while in the very same moments also becoming a teacher and authority to students themselves, a dual role that might feel awkward, tense and is certainly not an everyday experience. Moreover, the GTA might now feel they have to doubly prove themselves to their supervisor, both as student and teacher, adding another level of potential stress.

Moreover, being relatively young female GTAs – especially with students who lived in London and were used to relatively mixed classes, as undergraduate classes include mature students, the student university life is mixed across graduate and undergraduate studies and students often socialise outside of the undergraduate student body – exacerbated the potential stresses and tensions of being a GTA on fieldtrips. For instance, we might feel that our behaviour is under extra scrutiny. Teaching staff including GTAs are sometimes invited out for dinner, drinks or even nightclubbing especially on trips with older students. While we have gone for coffee, dinner and even drinks with bigger groups of students and have enjoyed his experience, especially young female GTAs will always and continuously have to consider how engaging such invitations might potentially affect their professional standing and authority – and monitor their own behaviour and group dynamics - in

ways that senior faculty do not have to worry about as much. So, for instance, while we have been told of instances where staff joined students at nightclubs on fieldtrips – and retrospectively reflected that they might not do so again – we would not consider engaging such invitations in the first place because we would instantly be aware that it might blur boundaries too much.

As has been shown in other contexts, preparing students in advance of fieldtrips is vital in maximising the learning opportunities they can provide (Noel and Colopy, 2012). In this context, we highlight that this preparation should extend to include tailored preparation for all teaching staff involved, including GTAs. This is especially true in terms of defining what is expected of GTAs, in terms of their role, their responsibilities but also during ‘non-work’ hours such as dinners. On our trips, navigating the position of GTA was acutely felt in the moments when students and staff parted. As discussed above, students often used their established relationships with GTAs, or simply their relative proximity in age and status, to encourage them to come out for dinner or drinks, an invitation GTAs had to consider carefully and, moreover, navigate in front of more senior staff members. At the same time, more senior faculty regularly invited GTAs to join for dinner or lunch, too. This created opportunities for much valued new informal connections but again required consideration and navigation on behalf of the GTA who similarly had to consider how ‘professional’ they had to remain in such contexts while also being sufficiently ‘fun’ and informal. In these moments especially, GTAs’ involvement in fieldtrips extends their ambiguous position within the

academy (Muzaka, 2009), which might require additional work to clearly define boundaries. In our case, we were lucky as the more senior staff we were working with on fieldtrips were generally aware and reflective about such dynamics and were often included in these conversations too: students joked with senior faculty and in one case even tried to convince the head of department to come out for drinks or go clubbing (they declined). Moreover, we could draw on established work-relationships with senior teaching staff, which further facilitated open conversations about expectations and roles.

Conclusion: Recommendations for GTAs that teach on fieldtrips and for more senior faculty working with them

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that students (in their learning), the staff running fieldtrips (in their teaching) and GTAs (in both their learning and teaching) can substantially benefit from GTAs being involved in fieldtrips. We argue that the approachability and in-between status of GTAs offers, for example, an opportunity to close the teaching feedback loop in an informal way that benefits staff and students alike. On the other hand, it provides moments for GTAs to connect informally with more senior members of staff, solicit much needed but often challenging-to-acquire feedback on teaching as well as research, and provides 'natural' moments to learn about the wider discipline in a space that is often very open for discussion.

Reflecting on our experiences, we have three key recommendations to fully harness this potential. Firstly, it is

essential to prepare thoroughly for the trip, well in advance of leaving. In particular, GTAs and staff should discuss explicitly: 1. the expectations around what work the GTA is to carry out in terms of teaching and pastoral care, 2. what specific responsibilities the GTA will have, and 3. what the norms are for socialising with students but also with staff. Moreover, it should then also be discussed what the GTA wants to get out of the trip for their own development. In this context, it is important for the GTA to actively reflect on this matter and for senior staff to realise that GTAs are fellow teaching staff but also more junior and less institutionally secure teachers, for whom potentially more is at stake, and who they, in effect, are mentoring during the trip.

Second and relatedly, it is important for the university or department to treat GTAs not solely as a cheap teaching labour force but to structurally encourage and facilitate their learning on trips, by setting expectations, providing guidance and allocating hours and resources to the above-described preparation activities. This sort of explicit, preparatory conversation is key for allowing GTAs to perform to their full potential, successfully navigate any tensions that may arise during the trip and get the most out of the trip for their own development. This is especially the case as, given the nature of fieldtrips, GTAs are hardly able to leave the situation while on the trip and therefore it is vital for them to understand what exactly the trip will entail and to be able to prepare for that in advance.

Thirdly, staff should reflect on the benefits of having GTAs on fieldtrips and offer them opportunities for learning during the trip and, where viable, offer opportunities to develop

lasting mentoring relationships. Similarly, GTAs should, before the fieldtrip, reflect on their own role and expectations and take the chance to discuss their ideas, questions or concerns. This again comes back to the importance of having conversations in advance of the actual trip: staff need to be made aware of what GTAs want to get out of the trip, what their own pedagogical aims are and what they are currently working towards in their teaching development. For example, is there scope for GTAs to give a guest lecture on the course or lead on developing one of the activities? Will marking be expected? Fundamentally, any conversation must thus attend to whether GTAs can develop their teaching skillset through the trip. In all this, it is vital that the department and university offer the right institutional framework in the form of guidance, best practice and resources for these conversations to take place.

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